

Refugee Speed

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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RADIO ADDRESS BY
THE PRESIDENT
TO THE NATION

The Oval Office

12:06 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Merry Christmas from the White House. Nancy and I wish we could personally thank the thousands of you who have sent us holiday cards, greetings and messages. Each one is moving and tells a story of its own -- a story of love, hope, prayer and patriotism. And each one has helped to brighten our Christmas.

Some of the most moving have come from fellow citizens who, unlike most of us, are not spending Christmas day at the family hearth, surrounded by friends and loved ones. I am thinking of the 12 U.S. Marines who sent us a card from Beirut, Lebanon where they will spend their Christmas helping to rebuild the shattered hopes for peace in a suffering land. And I am thinking of the Petty Officer serving aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise who asked that we remember him and his shipmates this holiday season. "Christmas in the Indian Ocean is no fun," he writes, "but it is for a very good cause."

Well, that is right, sailor. You are serving a very good cause, indeed. On this, the birthday of the Prince of Peace, you and your comrades serve to protect the peace He taught us. You may be thousands of miles away, but to us here at home, you have never been closer.

One of my favorite pieces of Christmas mail came early this year -- a sort of modern American Christmas story that took place not in our country's heartland, but on the troubled waters of the South China Sea last October. To me, it sums up so much of what is best about the Christmas spirit, the American character and what this beloved land of ours stands for -- not only to ourselves, but to millions of less fortunate people around the globe.

I want to thank Mr. Garry Kemp of Nina, Wisconsin for bringing it to my attention. It is a letter from Ordnance Man, First Class, John Mooney, written to his parents from aboard the Aircraft Carrier Midway on October 15th. But it is a true Christmas story in the best sense.

"Dear Mom and Dad," he wrote, "today, we spotted a boat in the water and we rendered assistance. We picked up 65 Vietnamese refugees. It was about a two-hour job getting everyone aboard and then they had to get screened by Intelligence and checked out by Medical and fed and clothed and all that. But now, they are resting on the hangar deck and the kids -- most of them seem to be kids -- are sitting in front of, probably, the first television set they have ever seen, watching 'Star Wars'. Their boat was sinking as we came alongside. They had been at sea five days and had run out of water. All in all, a couple of more days and the kids would have been in pretty bad shape."

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"I guess once in awhile," he writes, "we need a jolt like that for us to realize why we do what we do and how important really it can be. I mean, it took a lot of guts for those parents to make a choice like that -- to go to sea in a leaky boat in hope of finding someone to take them from the sea -- so much risk. But, apparently, they felt it was worth it, rather than live in a Communist country. For all of our problems with the price of gas and not being able to afford a new car or other creature comforts this year, I really don't see a lot of leaky boats heading out of San Diego, looking for the Russian ships out there.

"After the refugees were brought aboard, I took some pictures. But, as usual, I did not have my camera with me for the real picture -- the one blazed in my mind. As they approached the ship, they were all waving and trying as best they could to say, 'Hello, America sailor; hello, freedom man.' It is hard to see a boat full of people like that and not get a lump somewhere between chin and bellybutton. And it really makes one proud and glad to be an American. People were waving and shouting and choking down lumps and trying not to let other brave men see their wet eyes. A Lieutenant next to me said, 'Yea, I guess it's payday in more ways than one.' We got paid today and I guess no one could say it better than that.

"It reminds us all of what America has always been -- a place a man or woman can come to for freedom. I know we are crowded and we have unemployment and we have a real burden with refugees. But I honestly hope and pray we can always find room. We have a unique society, made up of cast-offs of all the world's wars and oppressions and, yet, we are strong and free. We have one thing in common -- no matter where our forefathers came from, we believe in that freedom. I hope we always have room for one more person -- maybe an Afghan or a Pole or someone else looking for a place where he does not have to worry about his family's starving or a knock on the door in the night -- and where all men who truly seek freedom and honor and respect and dignity for themselves and their posterity can find a place where they can, finally, see their dreams come true and their kids educated and become the next generations of doctors and lawyers and builders and soldiers and sailors -- Love, John."

Well, I think that letter just about says it all. In spite of everything, we Americans are still uniquely blessed, not only with the rich bounty of our land, but by a bounty of the spirit -- a kind of year-round Christmas spirit that still makes our country a beacon of hope in a troubled world and that makes this Christmas and every Christmas even more special for all of us who number among our gifts the birthright of being an American.

Until next week, thanks for listening. Merry Christmas and God bless you.

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12:12 P.M. EST